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Atari Online News, Etc.
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->From the Editor's Keyboard "Saying it like it is!"
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Welcome to spring in New England!! BAH!! Snow, cold, rain, and more cold. This is getting absolutely ridiculous!! While the snow is almost all gone, we can't seem to break this weather pattern. Well, I'm putting in my order - no, demand - for warmer weather!! Winter doldrums, or Spring Fever - whatever you want to call it, I have it (and don't want it!). I am ready for a real spring season for a change.

Phew, got that out of my system! So, are you permanently turned off by the presidential politics yet? And we don't even have to pay for an admissions ticket! The press and comedians could not have asked for better material. It's getting ugly out there, and I don't see things getting any better in the near future. Well, maybe after the convention!

So, while you're contemplating your proverbial navel this week, enjoy the political fireworks, and make sure that you read this week's issue from cover to cover for your weekly reality fix!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I really don't have a heck of a lot to say this week, other than the fact that it's kind of depressing to see the NewsGroup slow down the way it has. Sure, it's been this slow before, but it's always sped up after a while. It's to be expected, to be sure, because Atari hasn't produced a computer in... how many years? Twelve? And their popularity was waning even then. The hay-days of the 'Jackintosh' were over well before then. So it's not surprising that interest is where it is now.

I just hope interest doesn't die all together. While I'm aware that there are still active TI-99/4A and Coleco ADAM groups around (and I'm

not even going to mention the existence of Amiga groups, because that just really ticks me off), good solid Atari groups are hard to find.

I, as you hopefully do, still think back fondly on the days when there were 4 or 5 big Atari-Fests or shows a year, and the biggest problem was deciding which ones I could afford to go to.

WAACE, BlueRidge, Boston, Connecticut... those are fond memories for me. Buying all (or at least some of) the cool software I'd seen in magazines and in posts online, getting to meet John Eidsvoog and Charles Johnson (before whatever chemical imbalance has grabbed him now... check out littlegreenfootballs.com), Jim Allen of FastTech, Dan Wilga, Rick Flashman and Trisha Metcalf of Gribnif, Dave Small of Spectre fame, and... oh, what was his name?.. the guy from Merlin Associates... Richard?... well, anyway, you get the idea. Those were the good days. They were the times when you could go to a show and see the people that you'd only talked to (or about) on one of those new-fangled online services like CompuServe, Delphi, GEnie and NVN, and sit down and have a talk with 'em like they were the guy next door.

And you know why? Because THEY WERE the guy next door. They weren't Silicon Valley types. They were guys like me... only smarter, more driven and, it seemed, much luckier.

But these days, I realize just how lucky I have been. Those guys may STILL be much smarter and more driven, but I'm at least as lucky as they are.

You see, I've formed friendships with bunches of people simply because of my being an Atari user. My buddy and partner in crime here, Dana, for instance. I never would have met him had it not been for the facts that he and I both had Atari computers, both used Delphi, and both ended up writing for STReport.

Aside from Dana, there's Joe Donovan, Sue Hart, Rob Mahlert, Rich Scheidel, Gary Jones, Sheldon Winick, Van and all the guys in Asheville, the developers I've mentioned before, and tons and tons of people who've had a presence in my life and on my SM124 monitor through the years who I can't think of now. They've all been there for on reason... because I decided to buy an Atari computer one day, all those years ago.

Before I say good night, I just want to mention that it's Easter weekend. Now, whether you observe Easter, Passover, Ramadan or some holiday that I'd have a hard time pronouncing, I think it's time we started forgetting what makes us different and start celebrating the things that make us the same.

As for me and mine, I've been going a bit crazy the past several days, in preparation for Easter Sunday, when I'll be having my wife's family over for dinner. I, of course, will be making dinner, since our ham is about 18 pounds, and my wife is only in charge of cooking meat products that weigh less than 1/4 pound (before cooking). [Grin]

It's been hectic, but once everyone sits down at the table and smiles as I bring in the ham, it'll all be worth it.

Well, c'mon back next week, when I hope there'll be enough activity to warrant a question and answer column. 'Till then, keep your ears open so that you'll hear what they're saying when...

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week’s Gaming Section - Another Ban On Video Games Fails!
Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds!
New "Rainbow Six"!

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->A-ONE’s Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!

Minnesota Can’t Bar Kids from Violent Games

A federal appeals court on Monday upheld an injunction against a Minnesota law that targeted at children under 17 who rent or buy violent video games.

A three-judge panel of the 8th Circuit U.S. Court of Appeals agreed with a lower-court judge that Minnesota went too far when it passed its law two years ago because the state couldn’t prove that such games hurt children.

The law would have hit kids under 17 with a $25 fine if they rented or bought a video game rated "M" for mature or "AO" for adults only. It also would have required stores to put up signs warning of the fines.

Game makers and retailers swiftly challenged the law, arguing it was an unconstitutional restriction of free speech. U.S. District Judge James Rosenbaum ruled in their favor in July 2006.

But the appellate opinion, written by Judge Roger l. Wollman, showed the judges weren’t entirely happy about it.

"Whatever our intuitive (dare we say commonsense) feelings regarding the effect" of violent video games, precedent requires undeniable proof that such violence causes psychological dysfunction, Wollman wrote.

"The requirement of such a high level of proof may reflect a refined estrangement from reality, but apply it we must," he wrote.

Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds Hits the Fairways
and Swings Into Action on PlayStation3

Sony Computer Entertainment America Inc. announced Tuesday the North American release of Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds, available exclusively for PlayStation3 (PS3). Developed by Clap Hanz, in conjunction with Sony Computer Entertainment Worldwide Studios, Santa Monica Studio, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds takes the multi-million unit-selling Hot Shots Golf franchise and tees off on PS3 for the first time. As the latest entry in this unique golf series, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds maintains its signature over-the-top visuals and realistic golf physics while adding larger and more detailed courses, more extensive multiplayer options including 50 player tournaments, and an advanced shot mechanic that requires players to carefully monitor the swing motion of each character.

Available post launch, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds will offer consumers a host of downloadable content, including access to match and stroke play modes. Additionally, new courses and characters will become available for purchase over the coming months.

"Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds truly offers a golf experience for everyone, striking a balance between the wacky Hot Shots universe and realistic golfing action that can only be delivered on PS3," said Jeff Reese, director, software marketing, SCEA. "From its intuitive controls, to brilliant graphics, to robust online functionality, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds delivers the most entertaining and quirky golf gaming experience available."

In this brand new chapter of the Hot Shots Golf franchise, gamers have the opportunity to compete with others around the world by participating in sprawling multiplayer Real Tournaments boasting up to 50 players per round. Golfers looking for a more intimate match can engage in online New Real Format, where up to eight players can compete for the top spot. Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds also offers a brand new online lobby where fellow golfers can create customized avatars with more than 300 different options while chatting with each other before joining a game. Best of all, with the real-time stat tracking system, online golfers can see how they measure up with other Hot Shot golfers around the world.

Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds delivers new courses that take the virtual greens to beautiful and dramatic locations throughout the world including links along the coast, in the woods, through mountain ranges, and in the African savannah. Each 18 hole configuration showcases pitch-and-putt par threes all the way to challenging par five holes, and the courses are expanded and customized to offer larger playable environments, allowing clever golfers to utilize the entire course and neighboring fairways when strategically placing follow up shots. Additionally, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds unveils an Advanced Shot system that requires players to focus on their character’s motions rather than a power meter. The Advanced Shot mechanic provides a more

realistic experience, as players must monitor both takeaway and impact zone while taking into account distance, club selection, ball lie, and weather.

True to the spirit of the Hot Shots Golf franchise, Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds features 15 playable characters and six caddies, each sporting their own distinct look and personality. Each character can be customized in a variety of clothing options while gamers will monitor a range of player attributes including power, control, and accuracy. Also, single-player modes such as Challenge, Stroke, and Training, along with

multi-player modes such as Tournament and Match Play, are available to create a more diverse golfing experience each time players hit the links.

The independent Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) rating for Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds is "E" for "Everyone." For more information about the ESRB visit http://www.esrb.org. For more information about Hot Shots Golf: Out of Bounds, please visit http://www.hotshotsgolf.com .

New "Rainbow Six" Game Refines Formula

Fans of anti-terrorism tactics can lock and load this week with the return of the popular "Rainbow Six" franchise, which returns to Las Vegas promising fine-tuning of its realistic, fast-paced formula.

Released for Microsoft’s Xbox 360 and Sony’s Playstation 3 consoles, "Tom Clancy’s Rainbow Six Vegas 2" follow the success of "Rainbow Six Vegas," which sold more than 1.6 million units in the United States alone after its 2006 release.

"People really love military games, and Ubisoft really knows what it’s doing with these games," said IDC analyst Billy Pidgeon. "They’ve refined team-based combat to the point that they’ve set the bar."

Tom Clancy-branded games - "Rainbow Six," "Ghost Recon" and "Splinter Cell" - have accounted for about a third of annual revenue at Ubisoft Entertainment, Europe’s largest video game publisher.

Since 2000, when UbiSoft acquired the North Carolina studio that had been making the games for computers for two years, it has published 18 Clancy-themed titles that have sold a combined 50 million copies.

"Rainbow Six Vegas 2" is the seventh installment of the series since 2000, an extremely prolific pace for a "triple-A" franchise and one that rivals annual updates of sports titles such as "Madden" football from Electronic Arts.

Too frequent sequels can take the shine off of many popular game franchises as quality slips in the rush to meet deadlines, but Rainbow’s developers don’t see a cause for concern.

"No brand will stay fresh forever unless real innovation occurs as it moves along its life cycle," said Tony Key, Ubisoft’s senior vice president of sales and marketing. "It’s a testament to us not treating (the brand) as a cash cow, but as the family jewels."

Ubisoft’s strategy is to introduce simple, yet compelling, features in each new installment.

"Rainbow Six Vegas" added a useful cover mechanic that allowed players to fire their weapons from behind walls. "Vegas 2" grants the ability to sprint for short distances to avoid grenades or enemy fire.

"We chose not to reinvent the wheel," said Jean Pascal Cambiotti, a game designer for Ubisoft’s Montreal studio, which developed "Vegas 2."

"First and foremost, we’re gamers," he added.

But the multiplayer component has always been the defining characteristic of "Rainbow Six."

Earlier games buoyed Microsoft's fledgling Xbox Live online service. Key boasted that a Clancy game has been among the top five most-played games on Xbox Live since the service started in 2002.

"Vegas 2" adds more features to the multiplayer experience, including several new game modes as well as the ability for players to highly customize in-game characters.

Tom Clancy, the best-selling author of military novels such as "The Hunt for Red October," remains heavily involved in all the games and personally approves all the stories and weapons, according to Key.

"He's all about near-term plausibility," Key said of Clancy. "He asks, is this something that could really happen?"

Pidgeon believes that gameplay and storyline consistency has combined to contribute to the series' continued success, and he expects "Vegas 2" to be another huge hit for Ubisoft, though no longer necessarily because of Clancy's influence.

"I think now the games are doing more for Tom Clancy than he is doing for the games," Pidgeon said.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

'Spam King' Could Get 26 Years, $625,000 in Fines

They call him the "Spam King." He was one of the world's most prolific e-mail spammers, allegedly responsible for sending millions of spam e-mails. And he plead guilty on Friday to federal charges of mail fraud, wire fraud, and failure to file a tax return. His name is Robert Alan Soloway.

Soloway, 29, was arrested last summer after being indicted by a grand jury in U.S. District Court in Seattle. His trial was scheduled to begin in two weeks, but that changed when federal prosecutors dropped 37 counts, including all of the identity-theft cases, in a plea bargain. The charges against Soloway could send him to prison for up to 26 years. He also faces up to $625,000 in fines.

"We believe that there were extensive losses to thousands of victims," Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathryn Warma told The Seattle Times. U.S. District Court Judge Marscha Pechman will decide Soloway's fate.

According to the indictment, between November 2003 and May 2007, Soloway operated Newport Internet Marketing, which offered "broadcast e-mail"

software and services. These consisted of high-volume commercial e-mail messages with false and forged headers, relayed to recipients using botnets (infected computers).

According to prosecutors, Soloway and his company made several false and fraudulent claims about the products and services. Among them was a claim that the addresses used for the bulk e-mail were opt-in.

The Web site promised a satisfaction guarantee with a full refund to customers who purchased the broadcast e-mail product. However, according to the prosecutors, customers who later complained about the goods and services they had purchased or who asked for refunds were threatened with additional financial charges and referral to a collection agency.

Sophos's Security Threat Report research reveals that 95 percent of all e-mail is spam, of which 32 percent contains links to adult or offensive material. It's unlikely that Joe Public is likely to notice any drop in spam, according to Graham Cluley, a senior technology analyst at Sophos.

However, he continued, anything that sends a clear message to the computer underground that spamming will not be tolerated has to be good news for all Internet users. As Cluley sees it, we need more convictions of hackers and spammers to deter others from copying Soloway.

"Spammers put a lot of effort into hiding their tracks on the Internet, but we are seeing more and more arrests," Cluley said. Earlier this year Sophos reported on a man arrested in Tokyo after allegedly sending 2.2 billion junk e-mails. It was the first time that a suspected spammer was arrested in Japan.

"We need to see more countries around the world taking firm action against those who abuse the Internet to really begin to make a dent on the problem," Cluley said. "We also need consumers to stop buying goods advertised via spam messages."

While a major-league spammer has pleaded guilty to criminal charges, Cluley said what's interesting is that it's not for spamming, but for fraud and tax evasion. Quipped Cluley, "The Robert Soloway case brings to mind Al Capone, who was never successfully convicted for racketeering, but eventually jailed for tax evasion."

Justices Turn Down Microsoft Appeal

The Supreme Court on Monday handed Microsoft Corp. a defeat by refusing to rule on the software giant's request to halt an antitrust suit against it.

The suit was brought in 2004 by Waltham, Mass.-based Novell Inc., which said in court papers that Microsoft "deliberately targeted and destroyed" its WordPerfect and QuattroPro programs in order to protect its Windows operating system monopoly.

Novell alleged that Microsoft targeted the programs because they could run on alternative operating systems and therefore could enable alternatives to Windows to gain market share.

Microsoft argued in court filings that Novell did not compete in the

operating systems market, and therefore cannot claim to have been harmed by alleged anticompetitive conduct by Microsoft in that market.

A federal district court and the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, based in Richmond, Va., sided with Novell and allowed the suit to proceed. Microsoft's lawyers said that decision expands the application of antitrust laws "far beyond their intended scope."

Plaintiffs in antitrust suits can seek damages that are triple the actual harm.

A federal court ruled in 2001 that Microsoft had illegally protected its Windows operating system monopoly. As part of a settlement with the federal government and 17 states the following year, Microsoft agreed to court oversight of its business practices. A federal judge in January extended that oversight to November 2009.

The federal government's antitrust lawsuit focused on Microsoft's anticompetitive actions against Netscape and Sun Microsystems Inc. Novell argues that its software is similar to Netscape's Navigator browser and Sun's Java: neither competed directly with Windows, but Microsoft saw them as benefiting potential competitors.

Novell sold WordPerfect and QuattroPro to Corel Corp. in 1996.

Despite the suit, the two companies later became business partners. In 2006 Microsoft agreed to pay Novell $240 million to license its Linux enterprise software and to spend $94 million over five years to market both Novell's software and Windows to its corporate customers. Microsoft also agreed to pay Novell $108 million under a patent agreement.

The deal also required Novell to pay millions in royalties to Microsoft.

The Supreme Court's decision allows Novell's lawsuit to continue. Microsoft said it would defend itself in lower court. "We believe the facts will show that Novell's claims, which are 12 to 14 years old, are without merit," David Bowermaster, a Microsoft spokesman, said in an e-mail.

The case is Microsoft Corp. v. Novell Inc., 07-924. Chief Justice John Roberts, who owns Microsoft stock, recused himself from the decision.

U.S. To Name Head of New Cyber Security Center

Tech entrepreneur and author Rod Beckstrom will be named to run a new National Cyber Security Center at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, according to news reports.

Beckstrom, founder of Cats Software and co-founder of Twiki.net, a company offering an open-source wiki software system, would head the center, created by U.S. President George Bush in a January directive, according to reports in The Washington Post and The Wall Street Journal. The Bush administration has largely been silent about the cybersecurity center.

In addition to founding a handful of tech companies and nonprofit groups, Beckstrom is co-author of the book, "The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations," which praises the nimbleness of decentralized organizations. Beckstrom has suggested the U.S. government could better fight terrorist groups by taking a more decentralized approach, including using outsourcing and deploying more autonomous special operations units on the battlefield.

Beckstrom would reportedly report directly to DHS Secretary Michael Chertoff. Chertoff, in September 2006, appointed Greg Garcia, the former vice president for information security policy and programs at the Information Technology Association of America, as DHS assistant secretary for cyber security and telecommunications. Garcia reports to a DHS under secretary.

An official announcement about Beckstrom's appointment could come as soon as Thursday.

China Blocks Internet News on Tibetan Crackdown

China has succeeded in blocking the flow of news about its crackdown on Tibetan protesters. While China has traditionally exerted strong control over traditional media outlets such as television, radio and newspapers, this week's developments are notable for the country's effective control of YouTube, blogs and other Internet communications.

While Western news outlets are getting information out to the rest of the world, many Chinese remain in the dark. The Wall Street Journal reported that Baidu.com, China's largest search engine, turns up no news in a search for "Tibet" (the fifth most popular search term on Baidu Monday), while searches for "Tibet riot" produce hits to pages that have been removed.

In addition, China's major Internet portals, Sina and Sohu.com, are devoid of news of the uprising and repression. And Chinese Internet video sites Tudou.com, Youku.com and 56.com - the Chinese equivalents of YouTube - are similarly vacant.

Of course, YouTube itself has many videos of the protests, but China has blocked the Google-owned site. Google CEO Eric Schmidt said the company is looking into the reports of blocking.

Observers are not completely sure how China is blocking all the news, the Journal reported. In some cases, entire domains are blocked; in other cases, only certain pages. While editors of state-run media frequently avoid controversial topics, independent Internet companies also cooperate with censorship; they are required to monitor user-supplied content and delete pornography, as well as a list of forbidden topics.

The censorship raises a challenge to the much-vaunted claim that the Internet views censorship as network damage and routes around it - a claim no less a technology luminary than Bill Gates repeated last month. "I don't see any risk in the world at large that someone will restrict free content flow on the Internet. You cannot control the Internet," the Microsoft chairman told an audience at Stanford University.

The evidence so far indicates that Gates and conventional Net wisdom are

wrong. Apart from a minority of technologically savvy users who employ proxy servers to get around the blocks, China can and is censoring the Internet for its citizens.

People in Tibet have slowly been able to get information and images out to the rest of the world, even if people in China have had a harder time accessing the information. One of the last Westerners to get into Tibet before the crackdown, Ken Speckle was able to post photos of the riots and police response on Friday, but was silent over the weekend. On Monday he posted, "I have been without access to the Internet for a number of days."

James Fallows, writing in The Atlantic magazine this month, reported that China is able to censor the Internet so effectively because of a strategy it terms the "Golden Shield Project." The Internet in China comes through a small number of fiber cables that enter the country at just three points, he wrote. "Thus, Chinese authorities can easily do something that would be harder in most developed countries: physically monitor all traffic into or out of the country."

In many past incidents, western Internet companies have cooperated with Chinese authorities in censoring content and search engines. To deal with such complicity, Human Rights Watch announced Tuesday it would publish a code of conduct for service providers. "We are currently working with a number of (ISPs) to develop a code of conduct that would minimize that complicity," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of New York-based Human Rights Watch.

US-Swedish Carrier Spat 'Breaks' Net

President Bush famously spoke of "the Internets" in 2004. Well, they're here.

Since March 13, customers of two large Internet providers, Cogent Communications Group Inc. and TeliaSonera AB are unable to contact each other through the Internet, unless they have backup connections from other companies.

This means, for instance, that some U.S. Web sites hosted by Cogent customers are inaccessible to surfers in the Nordic countries, where Sweden-based TeliaSonera is the largest telecommunications operator. It's like Cogent and TeliaSonera customers are on different Internets.

"Basically, parts of the Internet can't talk to each other," said Earl Zmijewski, general Manager of the Internet data division at Renesys Corp., which keeps track of how carriers route traffic over the Internet.

It's not the first time this has happened: Now and then, Internet companies indulge in what Zmijewski calls playing "chicken." If they're fighting over a contract, they disconnect each other, and wait to see who blinks first. The number of irate customers each company faces will probably determine who does.

David Schaeffer, chief executive of Washington-based Cogent, said the two companies had a "peering" contract, under which they exchanged traffic from each other's customers, with neither company paying the other for

access. But TeliaSonera continuously breached the terms of the contract by not exchanging traffic in certain locations, and refusing to upgrade connections that were saturated, Schaeffer said.

That forced Cogent traffic to take long detours, according to Schaeffer. For instance, it sometimes had to carry data from a Cogent customer in Europe across the Atlantic to the U.S., then hand it over to TeliaSonera, which carried it back across the Atlantic to its European destination.

Cogent cut its direct links to TeliaSonera on March 13. For a while, customers of the two companies were still able to connect indirectly, through intermediaries connected to Cogent and TeliaSonera, but that possibility disappeared on Friday, according to Renesys

Schaeffer said the loss of alternate routes had nothing to do with Cogent, and speculated that TeliaSonera has refused to pay other providers for traffic destined for Cogent.

TeliaSonera did not comment on that allegation. Spokeswoman Maria Hillborg said the companies were trying to work out an agreement, and that a "requisite for that agreement is that TeliaSonera receives the compensation Cogent owes us."

Schaeffer denied that the companies were in negotiations.

Cogent has 15,000 customers, most of them large corporate, government and academic entities, who in turn provide "tens of millions" of people with Internet access. Most of the customers have backup links from other providers, or use the Cogent link as a backup to their main provider. Either way, they are still able to connect to TeliaSonera’s 36.1 million direct customers through the other link.

Schaeffer said TeliaSonera’s reluctance to improve the connections to Cogent were probably due to Cogent’s recent expansion in the Nordic company’s home territory.

"We’ve become much more aggressive as we have expanded our network about four months ago in Norway and Finland," Schaeffer said.

Mozilla Says Firefox 3 Ready for Prime-Time

A new version of Mozilla’s popular Firefox Web browser is ready for download with improved security and memory use as the tiny company takes a stab at Microsoft Corp’s dominant Internet Explorer.

The program’s creators told Reuters on Thursday that the privately-held company’s trial version of Firefox 3 browser is ready for the masses to use after months of development.

Until now, the company has discouraged average Internet users from moving on from Firefox 2, which was launched in October 2006.

"In many ways it (Firefox 3) is much more stable than anything else out there," Mozilla Corp Vice President of Engineering Mike Schroepfer said in an interview.

Key rivals to Firefox are market leader Microsoft’s Internet Explorer and Apple Inc’s Safari browser.

Engineers at Mozilla are still putting the finishing touches on the software and hope to release the final version of Firefox 3 by the end of June, Schroepfer said.

Mozilla is in a battle with Microsoft, which unveiled an experimental version of its Internet Explorer 8 in Las Vegas earlier this month and is looking to expand its presence on the Web through its bid to acquire Yahoo Inc.

Additions boost security and allow users to run Web sites when they are not connected to the Internet. Mozilla also says Firefox 3 uses less computer memory than Firefox 2.

Until now Mozilla has discouraged the typical computer user from exploring these new features. But its developers said on Thursday that the situation has changed and that they will be revising their Web site.

As of Thursday afternoon, the Web site still stated: "We do not recommend that anyone other than developers and testers download the Firefox 3 beta 4 milestone release. It is intended for testing purposes only."

But they said that as they concluded their fourth round of tweaking their software, they determined it was ready for prime time.

A fifth round of changes, due to begin within the next few weeks, will involve "tuning the visual look and feel of the program" and further improving its stability," Schroepfer said.

Facebook Adds Privacy Controls, Plans Chat Feature

Facebook said on Tuesday it is introducing new privacy controls that give users of the fast-growing social-network site the ability to preserve social distinctions between friends, family and co-workers online.

Facebook executives told reporters at the company’s Palo Alto, California headquarters of changes that will allow Facebook’s more than 67 million active users worldwide to control what their friends, and friends of their friends see.

The Silicon Valley company was founded in 2004 as a social site for students at Harvard University and spread quickly to other colleges and eventually into work places. Its popularity stems from how the site conveniently allows users to share details of their lives with selected friends online.

While part of Facebook’s appeal has been the greater degree of privacy controls it offers users compared with other major social network sites, the site has also been the target of two major rebellions by its users in response to new features many felt exposed previously private information to wider view.

Matt Cohler, Facebook’s vice president of product management, told reporters the company was seeking to evolve beyond the simple privacy

controls originally aimed at relatively homogenous groups of college-age users.

"We have a lot more users, a lot more types of users, a lot more relationships, we have a lot more types of relationships," Cohler said.

But only 25 percent of existing users have bothered to take control of their privacy using Facebook’s existing personal information settings, the company said in a statement.

Use of Facebook has exploded fivefold over the past year and a half. Two-thirds of its users are now located outside the United States compared with about 10 percent 18 months ago, when most members were student age and in the United States.

Facebook members will be able to control access to details about themselves they share on the site at a group-level by creating and managing lists of friends that are granted different levels of access to such information. Users already control what individual friends see on a member’s profile.

The new privacy controls will be introduced in the early morning hours of Wednesday, California time, the company said.

The group privacy controls take advantage of "friends lists," a feature the company introduced in December that help members organize friends in their network into groups. These private lists allow users to target messages to selected friends or filter what personal details those groups see.

Users can create up to 100 different "friends lists."

Late last year, Facebook allowed users to turn off a controversial feature called Beacon that monitors what Web sites they visit and Chief Executive Mark Zuckerberg apologized for not responding sooner to privacy complaints.

Beacon is a way to keep one’s network of friends on Facebook informed of one’s Web surfing habits. Critics argued this transformed it from a members-only site known for privacy protections into a diary of one’s wider Web activities.

The company backed down in response to a petition signed by 50,000 Facebook users to scale back the Beacon feature.

Cohler said the company faces what he called a "classic Silicon Valley dilemma" between adding new features, making sure they are easier to use by the widest number of people, while also protecting members from unexpected personal revelations.

In addition, the company confirmed recent reports it is working on a new instant messaging chat feature that runs inside Facebook, allowing users to hold spontaneous back-and- forth chat with their friends on the site.

Facebook Chat, as the feature is known, will be introduced in a matter of weeks, the company said. It works inside a Web browser without requiring that users download any special software, akin to services such as Meebo.com to allow one-on-one chats.

Vista SP1: Threat or Menace?

Apologies to J. Jonah Jameson - I doubt the esteemed publisher of the Daily Bugle ever even used a PC - but I couldn't resist cribbing one of his more famous headlines. Ol' Jonah always had a bad habit of selling short your friendly neighborhood Spider-Man, no matter how much good the webslinger did. Similarly, the long-awaited release of Service Pack 1 for Windows Vista seems to have done little to quiet the grumbling about Microsoft's latest OS.

Popular wisdom says you should wait for SP1 before switching to any new version of Windows. Ironically, the question on the minds of current Vista customers is whether it's the right time to switch to SP1.

Vista SP1 reportedly wraps some 551 bug fixes along with performance, reliability, and compatibility enhancements. But given how customers who have upgraded from XP have struggled with driver and application incompatibilities, it's no surprise that many are gun-shy of the latest update.

According to PC World's test lab gurus, the Service Pack is safe and it does improve performance, albeit not enough to crow about. My own, totally anecdotal survey reveals that some customers have upgraded with no problems (myself, for example), while others claim unexpected crashes and instability - almost assuredly the result of driver issues - but that any system speedup could just as easily be attributable to the placebo effect.

The multimillion-dollar question is whether SP1 will be the hoped-for catalyst that triggers a widespread migration from XP to Vista. The Service Pack may help to allay concerns about code quality, but the perception that Vista's benefits simply don't outweigh the risk of the upgrade remains a challenge for Microsoft, particularly among business users.

What about you? Does the arrival of Vista SP1 alter your business's Windows upgrade timetable, or are you planning to stick with XP for as long as possible? And does this massive wrap-up of patches prove that Microsoft is doing right by its Vista customers, or does J. Jonah Jameson have the right idea? Sound off in the comments.

Dell Denies Report of Hard Drive Returns

Dell Inc. denies an analyst report claiming 20 percent to 30 percent of laptops with so-called solid-state drives are being returned.

Solid-state drives, though expensive, are seen as the next big advance in laptop computers because they're durable and light. In a solid state drive, the spinning platter of a conventional hard drive has been replaced by memory chips.

Dell offers Samsung SSDs as an option on its laptops for $600 to $899 extra. The latest Apple Inc. laptop, the MacBook Air, can also be bought with an SSD, for about $1,000 extra.

Avian Securities analyst Avi Cohen said Monday in reporting on the return rates that hardware failure rates on SSDs were 10 percent to 12 percent, compared to 1 percent to 2 percent for traditional hard drives. Still other customers are returning SSD-equipped laptops because they don’t provide a speed advantage, Cohen wrote in a research report.

The "rates cited by Avian Securities don’t even vaguely resemble what’s happening in our business," Lionel Menchaca, Dell’s chief blogger, wrote on Wednesday.

"Our global reliability data shows that SSD drives are equal to or better than traditional hard disk drives we’ve shipped," Menchaca wrote. The return rate is about a tenth of the reported one, he wrote.

Cohen acknowledged the rebuttal and said he was sticking to the main contention of his report - that the market likely won’t see shipments of the next generation of cheaper, and probably less reliable, SSDs this year.

Samsung Semiconductor representatives declined to comment on the report, referring questions to Dell.

Sarkozy’s ’Cyber Spin Doctor’ Sparks Wrath on the Web

The French blogosphere is abuzz with outrage and derision over a 24-year-old appointed by Nicolas Sarkozy to keep an eye on what is being said about the president on the World Wide Web.

"Sarkozy’s little cop," "Sarkozy’s eye on the net," and "KGB Web" are some of the comments and videos posted since Nicolas Princen on Monday joined the president’s communications team as an Internet advisor at the Elysee palace.

He is "in charge of monitoring what is circulating on the Web about the president of the republic: blogs, news sites, videos ... just as one might do for a traditional press review," explained an advisor at the Elysee.

His appointment came after a string of embarrassing incidents involving the president became Internet hits, such as a video of Sarkozy’s verbal attack on a man at an agricultural fair or footage of him apparently drunk at a press conference last year at a G8 summit.

There are also countless blogs and websites set up to mock or satirise the leader, whose popularity has been plummeting and whose right-wing UMP party suffered heavy losses in local elections last Sunday.

Every day about 10,000 postings are made about the president and "80 percent of them are critical," said Nicolas Vanbremeersch, founder of a political blogging network "La Republique des blogs."

The appointment of Princen, who worked on the website of Sarkozy’s presidential campaign last year, has sparked derision but also serious concerns among the online community.

One satirical video posted on Dailymotion begins with a poster showing

the Soviet symbols the hammer and sickle and bearing the words "KGB Web - Elysee."

It then shows a man in a wig, his face covered in bandages, advising viewers that they should follow his example and be careful about what they say about the president.

"I don’t want to end up in a jail, tortured," said the man.

A blog, http://detoutetderiensurtoutderiendailleurs.blogspot.com, said the appointment "can only be another sign of a hardening on the part of the authorities towards one of the last sources of completely free information."

Olivier Monnot, of the www.blogonautes.fr site that monitors French blogs, said "the irony is that Nicolas Princen is in charge of monitoring the ’buzz’ about Sarkozy and he finds himself at the centre of ’buzz.’"

Appointing someone to monitor the Web is not in itself worrying, he said, but "if it serves as a base to intimidate bloggers and muzzle freedom of expression, then it’s a problem."

For the journalist Pierre Haski, who spent many years at the daily newspaper Liberation before joining the online news site Rue89, Princen’s appointment "marks the recognition by the Elysee that what is said on the Internet is more important than might have been thought."

He added that it was up to Princen to show, through his work, that the online community need not be worried.

Tech Visionary Arthur C. Clarke Dies at 90

Science fiction writer, inventor, scuba diver, and visionary Sir Arthur C. Clarke died Tuesday at his home on the island nation of Sri Lanka at the age of 90.

Clarke was best known in popular culture as the author of the story that inspired Stanley Kubrick’s 1968 film "2001: A Space Odyssey," but his greatest contribution to technology is creating the conceptual framework for geostationary satellites - machines that would remain in the same spot above the earth and act as relay stations for signals from the ground, covering a wide area. He published a paper about the concept in 1945, which was ultimately realized two decades later. The orbit into which geostationary satellites are placed is now known as the Clarke Orbit.

The Arthur C. Clarke Foundation confirmed Clarke’s death on its Web site Tuesday. He died of respiratory problems, according to media reports.

Born in England in 1917, Clarke served in the Royal Air Force during World War II, working on radar defense systems. He ultimately achieved the rank of flight lieutenant. He then went on to earn degrees in mathematics and physics from King’s College.

Having been interested in astronomy as a young boy, he served as the chairman of the British Interplanetary Society. In 1948 he wrote the story "The Sentinel," which would eventually form the basis for the

"2001" film. He moved to Sri Lanka (then known as Ceylon) in 1956, in part to pursue his interests in underwater exploration. He founded his own scuba diving school there.

Clarke suffered from post-polio syndrome in later life, and was confined to a wheelchair.

Celebrating his 90th birthday in December, 2007, Clarke wished for peace in Sri Lanka, for mankind to break its fossil fuel habit, and for the discovery of extraterrestrial beings.

Clarke married in the 1950s and later divorced. He had no children.

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